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The Danger of too great an Indulgence of speculative Opinions.

S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT THE
VISITATION,

HELD BY
THE ARCHDEACON OF WINCHESTER,

At Basingstoke,

ON THE SEVENTH DAY OF JUNE,
1792.

BY THE REV. CHARLES POWLETT, JUN. *R*
CHAPLAIN IN ORDINARY TO HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE PRINCE OF WALES,
AND
RECTOR OF WINSLADE, HANTS.

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No other Apology is necessary to be offered for publishing the following Discourse, than the unusual Temper of the Times, and the general Approbation, with which the Discourse was honoured by the Clergy present at the Visitation. If it can, in the least Degree, prove an Antidote to the pernicious Doctrines, which are so diligently dispersed through the Kingdom, and which are intended to shake from their Foundations, both the Civil and Ecclesiastical Establishments, the Author will be satisfied. He most sincerely hopes, that far more able Advocates will arise, and use their utmost Endeavours to prevent the total Subversion of good Order in the State by false Philosophy, and of Religion by speculative Infidelity.

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S E R M O N, &c.

I CORINTHIANS iii. 19.

“FOR THE WISDOM OF THIS WORLD IS FOOLISHNESS WITH GOD.”

IT surely ought to add no small Weight to the Sentiment expressed in the Text, that the Writer of it possessed an uncommon Share of that worldly Wisdom and worldly Knowledge, which he here teaches the Corinthians to despise. The great Apostle of the Gentiles did not deride Wisdom and Knowledge, because he was himself weak and ignorant, as it is well known that he was skilled in all the Learning of the Times, and his Abilities appear through the whole Course of his nervous and elevated Writings. In various Parts of his Epistles, ST. PAUL expresses the Insufficiency of Man's Understanding, and the Folly of priding ourselves in our own Acquire-

Acquirements, and in supposing that our Judgment and Penetration can extend to Infinite Comprehension. In his Epistle to the Romans, he tells them, that “ GOD’s Judgments are unsearchable, and his Ways past finding out.” In another Place, that “ when they knew GOD, they glorified him not as GOD; neither were thankful, but became vain in their own Imaginations, and their foolish Hearts were darkened;—professing themselves to be Wise, they became Fools.” In many other Passages he speaks to the same Purpose, but particularly in the Words immediately following the Text, where he says, “ The LORD taketh the Wise in their own Craftiness; he knoweth the Thoughts of the Wise that they are vain.”

THUS we are taught how trifling in the Sight of GOD is the profoundest Wisdom Man can boast of; how ineffectual its Powers without his Assistance;—that Humility is the truest Wisdom, most becoming the Weakness of Mortality, and the Character of Christians.

I SHALL proceed to consider in this Discourse the Danger and Absurdity, I may add Impiety, of indulging speculative Opinions, the real Causes from whence they arise, and the bad Effects which usually attend them.

FIRST,

FIRST, It is evident that Speculation * does not proceed from Men's being desirous of knowing more, and of laudably investigating the Truth, but from a vain Opinion of the Knowledge they have acquired, and of their own Powers to discover Errors, to which they think weaker Minds have yielded a blind Submission: They search—not to clear, but to confound; they aim not at convincing themselves, but at confuting others. “The Wisdom that is from above,” ST. JAMES tells us, “is pure, peaceable, and gentle;” but in this worldly Wisdom there is no Purity, no Gentleness, and, instead of bringing Peace upon the Earth, it brings a Sword.

WHEN Christianity was first planted in the World, it disturbed no settled Form, made no Noise or Commotion, but fell like the Dew of Heaven on a Fleece of Wool. The Christian Religion is compounded of Mildness and Benevolence, it makes Men just and honest, it fills their Hearts with virtuous Principles, but not their

* It is not very easy to give, in express Terms, the Meaning of the Word *Speculation*; yet, as I hope this Sermon will be read by Persons who have not had the Advantages of a very liberal Education, I think it necessary to explain its meaning as clearly as I can.—A Man who is a Speculator is perpetually endeavouring to alter the usual Course of Things, and fancies he can see more clearly than other People;—he is for ever forming Schemes in his own Brain, which can never be reduced to Practice;—and is never satisfied, because the Affairs of this World are not conducted in a perfect Manner, which it is absolutely impossible they ever should.

Heads with nice and unmeaning Distinctions, it teaches Men not to be Troublers of the World, but to go quietly and inoffensively through it, with as little Noise and Provocation as possible, and so to arrive, finally, at Peace and eternal Rest in the Kingdom of God.

It may justly be reckoned one of the greatest Glories of this Country, that it was the first great Kingdom in the World that received the Christian Faith: It had also the additional Glory of reforming the Errors which had crept into the Roman Church, and establishing the pure and Protestant Faith which we profess.

THE English Reformation was most perfect and compleat in its Kind, as retaining the most ancient Doctrine, and soundest Confession of Faith, founded on the Holy Scriptures. It was not effected by Tumult and Sedition, as (we too well know) most Changes are, but by rational Persuasion, followed by wholesome Laws. There was no Noise of Arms, no Clamour, no Distress; it was the most moderate and temperate, as being the Result of Deliberation and Reason, not of blind Passion, or an Humour of Innovation. Since, then, we have been blessed with this Reformation, we should be thankful that, like the Dove sent out from the Ark, we have found rest for our Feet, and, like her, wave the Olive-Branch,

Branch, as the Emblem of our Peace, and not be for ever wishing Change upon Change, and calling the last a Reformation.

THOUGH, in this Country, where Religious and Civil Liberty go Hand in Hand, the People in general are too sensible of their Happiness not to be jealous of Innovations, yet it is too evident, that, in the World at large, a Spirit of Discontent is gone forth, like a noisome Pestilence, to disturb the Establishments of Ages, and to overthrow the Peace and Quiet of long-settled and long-flourishing Governments. This new Philosophy appears, unfortunately, at first Sight, as splendid and attractive, as it does false and dangerous, when examined by sound and unprejudiced Reason. The Effects that this chimerical and speculative System has on Governments, are not proper to be discussed upon the present Occasion, I shall therefore confine myself to treat of the ill Effects, which it is likely to have on Religion. Let it not, however, be imagined, that the Interests of Government and of Religion are *eventually* separate: A Contempt of the one is ever attended by Disaffection to the other. The same Impatience of Controul leads Mankind to oppose Civil Laws, as well as the Precepts of Religion. When Men cease to respect Religion, Government has

lost its strongest Safeguard and Protection: as Speculation in Politics, when too far extended, too often ends in Anarchy and Confusion, so Speculation in Religion never fails to end in Impiety and Infidelity.

IN the early Days of Christianity, a Simplicity of Manners reigned, which we are now to look for in vain; when People did not "think more highly of themselves than they ought to think," were contented with the quiet Exercise of their Reason, and did not aim at Discoveries far beyond its Comprehension. They looked upon Subordination as necessary for the mutual Benefit of Mankind, they did not disdain to "do their Duty chearfully in that State of Life unto which it had pleased God to call them;" they searched the Scriptures to strengthen their Faith, not to weaken it, they searched the Scriptures to direct their Conduct, and they were taught by those Scriptures to "submit themselves to every Ordinance of Man, for the LORD'S Sake, to honour all Men, love the Brotherhood, fear God, honour the King."

BUT the Age of Humility is gone—we are now arrived at, what may well be deemed, the Age of Speculation. Though, indeed, Men in former Times were too fond of the Imaginations of their own foolish and darkened
Hearts,

Hearts, they were too apt to leave the plain Track which sound Reason would have pointed out to them, and to wander in the Regions of Fancy and Imagination. From this fatal Cause have arisen all the Schisms, Heresies, and Divisions that have ever disgraced the Christian Church; one has been "of PAUL, another of APOLLOS," instead of all uniting together in the Faith of CHRIST. But the chief Heresy, which arises from the speculative Opinions of the present Day, is Unitarianism. Though Men are not sufficiently mad to profess themselves Atheists, yet many deem a Disbelief in CHRIST a Proof of Wisdom, and value themselves upon their superior Understanding, because they reject the Truths of our holy Religion. They deny the Divinity of our SAVIOUR, because they cannot explain the Union of the Human and Divine Natures.

It would take too large a Scope to enumerate, in this general Discourse, the Variety of Texts which prove the Divinity of our SAVIOUR:* It surely ought to be sufficient

* AMONG the infinite Number of Passages in Scripture, wherein CHRIST declares himself to be GOD, and is declared so by his Apostles, I shall select the following.—In the 22d Chapter of St. Matthew, and 41st Verse, we read, that whilst the Pharisees were gathered together, JESUS asked them, saying, "What think ye of CHRIST; whose Son is he?" They say unto him, "The Son of David." He saith unto them, "How then doth David, in Spirit, call him

ficient for our Conviction, that GOD has expressly declared it. Never can it be deemed Wisdom in Mortals to question the Truths, which their Maker has been pleased to reveal to them. But the Pride of Man would grasp at every Thing, it sets itself to judge, or rather to make childish and groundless Conjectures, where it has no Principles to proceed upon, and to unravel inexplicable Mysteries.—Men will not believe what they cannot comprehend, wilfully forgetting the great Distance be-

him, LORD; saying, the LORD said unto my LORD, sit thou on my right Hand, 'till I make thine Enemies thy Footstool?" If David then call him LORD, how is he his Son? The very first Verse in St. John's Gospel is alone sufficient to prove our SAVIOUR's Divinity. In the Old Testament, the MESSIAH is frequently called the WORD. St. John says, "In the Beginning was the WORD, and the WORD was with GOD, and the WORD was GOD. The same was in the Beginning with GOD."—In the 8th Chapter of St. John, and 53d Verse, when the Jews said, "Art thou greater than our Father Abraham, who is dead, and the Prophets are dead, whom makest thou thyself? Thou art not yet 50 Years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?" JESUS answered, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I AM." Here we see a positive Proof of his Pre-existence, consequently of his Divinity. In the 10th Chapter and 30th Verse of the same Evangelist, JESUS says, "I and my FATHER are ONE." Here is not only a Proof of his Divinity, but of the mysterious Doctrine of the Trinity, or the Unity of three Persons in one Godhead; which may receive farther Confirmation from the 14th Chapter and 8th Verse; Philip saith unto him, "LORD, shew us the FATHER, and it sufficeth us." JESUS saith unto him, "Have I been so long Time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the FATHER, and how sayest thou then, Shew me the FATHER? Believest thou not that I am in the FATHER, and the FATHER in me? Believe me that I am in the FATHER, and the FATHER in me." The Apostle Thomas, in the 20th Chapter of St. John, and 27th Verse, calls our SAVIOUR, "His LORD and his GOD." St. Paul, in the 2d Chapter of his Epistle to the Philippians, says, that JESUS CHRIST being "in the Form of GOD, thought it no Robbery to be equal with GOD."—I hope I have offered a sufficient Number of Texts fully to confute the Doctrine of Unitarianism.

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tween their finite Understandings, and the infinite Wisdom of GOD, and not distinguishing the Difference between Faith and Sight. Faith is a Belief in those Things which we cannot understand, and which would have been for ever hid from us, unless GOD had been pleased to reveal them to us. It is a Tribute of Humility due from us ignorant Creatures to our MAKER, to trust in him, and to acquiesce, without murmuring, in all his Decrees and Disposals. What Merit, indeed, have we, if we only believe Truths, which come within the Limits of our Comprehension, and strike our Senses so forcibly, that, without doing Violence to our Understandings, we cannot possibly refuse our Consent to them? Let us call to Mind the Words of our SAVIOUR, which he spake to the unbelieving Thomas, "Thomas, because thou hast seen me thou hast believed—blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Why should any think that they alone are to be exempt from the common Blindness of Human Nature? Why will they not be content to walk by Faith, and not by Sight, since that Sight, which they so much value, extends so very little a Way? But why has not Providence given them a clearer Sight and greater Powers in every Respect? No doubt, because their present Powers, if they would but
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be contented, are more adapted to their Situation in this World, and more conducive to their Happiness; thus the Sun, being now placed at a proper Distance, warms every Particle of Nature, revives and invigorates the Bodies of Plants, Animals, and Men; but if GOD permitted amuch nearer Approach of that Planet, the "Elements would melt with fervent heat; the Earth also, and all that is therein, would be burnt up."

A STRICTLY pious Man, one devoted to the Service of GOD, and hoping for Redemption through the Merits of his blessed SON, instead of cavilling at the Mysteries of the Deity, and presuming to search into Secrets which pass all Understanding, would, in the Humility of his Heart, exclaim with the Psalmist, "Such Knowledge is too wonderful and excellent for me, I cannot attain unto it." There is another great Error which prevails—the confounding the Nature of worldly Knowledge with the Knowledge of Religion: Men do not consider that it is not the same with the Doctrine of Christianity as with common Arts and Sciences, which depend upon Human Invention, and are consequently capable of daily Improvements; for the Mind of Man, not having an intuitive Knowledge, but proceeding by slow Degrees, infers one Thing from another, and thus, Day by Day, makes
new

new Discoveries. But it is quite otherwise with Christianity; for that, depending solely upon Divine Revelation, can admit of no new Discoveries. Time may obscure it, and the arrogant and licentious Wit of Man may perplex and confound it with its Inventions, but can never discover any Thing new, or bring to Light any Truth which did not exist from the Beginning. The Consequence is, that he that talks of the clearer Light of the latter Times, and clearer Discoveries in Religion, makes as absurd Assertions, as if he should affirm that he could distinguish an Object at a Distance better than those could who stood close to that Object.

THERE is no Truth less controvertible, than that a Deference ought to be paid to the different Changes of Manners in different Times; that the same Degree of Church Discipline, which was necessary and proper in the Days of TERTULLIAN and JUSTIN MARTYR, is neither proper or practicable in the present; that Austerity, which usually, and perhaps necessarily, attends novel Establishments, must and ought to be laid aside, when a Faith has acquired Strength and Respectability from the Conviction of Ages. Is it not to be esteemed the greatest of Blessings in this Kingdom, that the Characteristics of its Ecclesiastical as well as its Political Government, are
Mildness

Mildness and Liberality?—But whenever the Torrent of the Times is too rapid, ought we not to have Strength of Mind enough to bear up against it? Ought we not to have Confidence enough to oppose the Impetuosity of any erroneous and prevailing Opinions? Ought we not to teach others to discern the true Images of Things, through those thick Mists, which Speculators cast around them? Ought we not to endeavour to stem the Torrent of popular Error, not by Persecution but Mildness—not by Fear but Persuasion? Far be it from the Ministers of the Gospel to impose any unnecessary Restraints on the Minds of the People. Let them exercise their Reason to its fullest Extent; but let them be content with those Bounds, which GOD, not Man, has set to it: Let them (as it is their Duty to do) thoroughly investigate the Truths of their Religion, for the more its Tenets are searched into, the more excellent it will appear; but let us, at the same Time, exhort them, not arrogantly to attempt to fathom the Depth of Infinite Wisdom, and to soar to an Height which no Human Powers can ever reach: Let us tell them, that, in attempting to account for every Thing, and to trace out the whole Scheme of GOD's providential Operations, they assume a Task that is far above their Capacities, and disquiet themselves in vain.

vain. Let it be especially considered, of how much greater Value is the Honor of our Religion than personal Reputation, and how intimately that Honor is concerned in the peaceable and obedient Temper of those who profess themselves Christians; and surely a due Sense of these Things will have such a Weight upon those who are sincere in their Professions, as to depress idle Fancies and an ambitious Thirst for vain Glory.

IF we examine the Doctrines of the Christian Religion, we shall find, in Fact, that they are plain and easy Truths, intelligible to all: First—The Creation of the World;—Secondly—That, in consequence of the Sins of that World, GOD sent his beloved Son to be the Instructor and SAVIOUR of Mankind, and that he will, at the last Day, judge the World in Righteousness. These, which are the peculiar Principles of the Gospel, have nothing abstruse or mysterious in them, but are expressed in the most easy and obvious Terms. If you say that you cannot account for the Manner of GOD's creating the World, the Manner in which he exists every where, of the general Resurrection, and the Redemption of Mankind, I answer "It is no Part of your Religion that you should." These are the secret Things which belong unto the LORD your GOD, these are the Objects

of your Faith: the moral Part is applied to your Understandings, and is the Object of your Practice; as it is said "The Things which are revealed belong to you and to your Children for ever, to do all the Words of this Law." Here, then, is the Line drawn, which no Mortal can pass! Let not any of us, then, vainly presume upon our own Superiority, and sit down in the Seat of the Scornful: Let us not, by attempting to extend our Reason into the secret **Recesses of Heaven**, bewilder our Senses, and lose the **Comfort and Satisfaction** of a placid Mind and Religious Contentment: Let us not glory in that Wisdom, which is at best but Foolishness in the Sight of God—if we do glory, let us glory in the **LORD**.

LET us, upon the Evidences we have, which are very numerous and incontestable, and of the utmost Force with every considerate Mind—let us, upon the Evidences we have of the unerring Wisdom, inflexible Justice, and most perfect Goodness of the Great Author and Governor of the Universe, acquiesce, without murmuring, in all his Dispositions; and entertain a proper Opinion of all the Methods of his Providence. Let us do our Part, which we plainly understand; and let us trust in God that He will do His, though it exceeds the Strength of Human Wisdom to comprehend the Length
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and Breadth, Height and Depth of that Wisdom and Mercy, which he has manifested to the World through his Son JESUS CHRIST our LORD;

To whom, with the FATHER and the HOLY GHOST, be ascribed, as is most due, all Honor, Grace, Power, Might, Majesty, and Dominion, here and hereafter, World without End.



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and Fatherly, Right and Power of that William and
Mercy, which he has manifested to the World through
his Son Jesus Christ our Lord;

To whom, with the Father and the Holy Ghost,
be ascribed, as is most due, all Honor, Grace, Power,
Might, Majesty, as 20 JUL 1866
World without End.



